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ABSTRACT

Since 1997, policymakers in the United Kingdom and Europe have devoted extensive effort to devising policies and programs to reconnect young people with learning and work. In April 2001, England's government launched the Connexions Service, which is designed to meet young people's needs through a comprehensive, coherent, and holistic system of services such as the following: (1) a flexible curriculum that engages young people aged 14-19 and leads to relevant, sought-after qualifications; (2) assurance of high-quality provision in schools, further education colleges, and work-based learning; (3) targeted financial support for young people in learning; and (4) outreach, information, advice, support, and guidance. The respective European efforts have included many of the same principles and strategies but extend the age of young people served from 19 to 25. Other programs that have been initiated to help disaffected and socially excluded young people in the United Kingdom include the Young Adult Learners Partnership, which researches and develops effective approaches to learning and personal development among young adults on the margins of education, training, and employment, and Getting Connected, which is a curriculum framework intended to enhance the self-esteem and emotional literacy of young people outside the formal education and training system. These efforts have yielded valuable lessons regarding working with young adults. (Lists eight references and suggested readings.) (MN)

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NIACE Briefing Sheet 28

Young Adult Learners, Disaffection and Social Exclusion

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Young Adult Learners, Disaffection and Social Exclusion

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promoting adult learning

"As educators we are usually unable to affect the social or family circumstances in which learners are living and growing; but we could do more to offer a curriculum which permits young people to make choices, to build self-confidence, and to see the connections between learning and a better life."

(Only Connect: successful practice in educational work with disaffected young adults, NIACE, 1999)

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1. Policy Background

Since 1997 public policy has paid close attention to 'the lost generation' of young people who for too long had been failed by the education system and had dropped out of education, training and employment. Many had fallen through the net of social welfare provision and had entered a twilight world where they only ever encountered mirror images of themselves. They became known as the disengaged or disaffected. Early on the New Labour Government introduced a raft of initiatives designed to re-connect young people aged 14-25 with learning and work such as New Start, New Deal and the Learning Gateway.

England

In July 1999, the Social Exclusion Unit published a report called *Bridging the Gap*. In this report it was estimated that in England there were 161,000 young adults aged 16 and 17 not engaged in education, training or employment. On the basis of such findings the Social Exclusion Unit recommended the creation of a comprehensive youth support service.

In April 2001, the Government accepted these recommendations when it launched the Connexions Service: a support service for all young people aged 13-19. The strategy underpinning the Connexions Service is to provide a comprehensive and coherent approach to meet young people's holistic needs. The four key themes are:

- Flexible curriculum that engages different young people and leads to relevant, sought after qualifications;
- Ensuring high quality provision in school sixth-forms, further education colleges and work-based learning;
- Targeted financial support for young people in learning;
- Outreach, information, advice, support and guidance.

At the heart of the Connexions Service has been the creation of a network of Personal Advisers, drawn from a range of backgrounds, who provide personal support to young people. The ultimate aim of the Service is to remove barriers to learning, and to raise young people's aspirations to enable them to achieve their full potential.

Further information about the ongoing development of the Connexions Service can be found on its website: www.connexions.gov.uk

Alongside the implementation of the Connexions Service has been the introduction of an infrastructure of 47 local Learning and Skills Councils, overseen by a national **Learning and Skills Council** (LSC). From April 2001 the LSC has been responsible for the planning, funding and quality assurance of all post-16 learning and skills provision in England - as well as working with partners at all levels to promote workforce development and economic regeneration activity. Sections 114-122 of the Learning and Skills Act (2001) provide the statutory basis for the provision of the Connexions Service in England.

The Connexions Service and the Learning and Skills Council have gone some way towards achieving the Government's policy objective of increasing standards in education, widening participation and combating social exclusion. Other associated developments that have had an impact upon young adult learners have included:

- Learning Gateway
- Neighbourhood Support Fund
- Summer youth camps for 16 year-old school-leavers
- New Start
- New Deal
- Youth Offending Teams
- Graduation at 19
- The Children and Young People's Unit
- The Green Paper 14-19: extending opportunities, raising standards

Europe

Following extensive consultation with thousands of young Europeans, in November 2001 the European Commission launched its White Paper on Youth. The Paper proposes methods and priorities for getting young people more involved in influencing decisions that concern them.

"The Commission's White Paper constitutes a response to the profound sense of disaffectedness which young people feel for the traditional forms of participation in public life. More particularly, it seeks to mobilise them and get them involved in European integration, as advocated in the White Paper on Governance."

An interesting feature of the European perception of youth is that it extends to age 25, rather than 19, which is the case in the UK.

For further information about the European youth policy, and the European White Paper on Youth, please visit the National Youth Agency website: www.nya.org.uk/Europe.htm

2. Definitions and Causes of Disaffection

The particular sources of disaffection for any individual are many and complex, and each young person will have his or her own unique story. When asked, however, most will trace a significant portion of their disenchantment back to unsatisfactory and often unhappy school experiences that frequently culminated in truancy and exclusion. Exclusion from school is closely related to exclusion from many other opportunities later on.

More general causes of disaffection have been widely discussed. Some studies have distinguished between:

Underlying causes: such as poverty, inter-generational unemployment, unstable home and family situations, peer group pressure and, most importantly, earlier learning difficulties.

Precipitating causes: divided into two broad categories. On the one hand, there are in-school factors, such as bullying, teacher attitudes, an inappropriate curriculum and a seemingly irrelevant qualifications system. On the other hand, there are out-of-school factors like poor job prospects, teenage pregnancy and parenthood, drug abuse and criminal behaviour.

For most disengaged young adults it is likely that their disaffection arises and continues as a result of some complex interaction between what sociologists refer to as 'agency and structure'.

Their main experience of structural factors is likely to be of an education and employment system in which they and their family have not thrived, and, in response, they may well have chosen to instigate attitudes and behaviours which put themselves at an even greater distance from it. Even though there may be certain features common to all or most disaffected young adults, the specific causes, circumstances and consequences of the disengagement of each will be different in important ways from any other's.

In the widespread public debate about what has come to be called 'social exclusion', young adults have also been referred to as 'the lost generation' or in 'status zer0'. Such dramatic labelling is controversial, in part because it suggests the emergence of a distinct youth underclass and also because it implies polarisation and rigidly oppositional attitudes. The actual picture seems to be more complex and more fluid with many young adults moving in and out of mainstream society at different times. Moreover, not everyone who is disengaged is also hostile to education and some are described as 'passively disaffected'. Nevertheless most are, and will need no prompting to assert that "learning sucks", as they turn their backs on the conventional programmes and provision.

3. The scale of disaffection

The scale of disaffection is hard to measure precisely. In addition to arguments over definition there is a continuing debate about the reliability of the figures frequently cited.

- In July 1999, the Social Exclusion Unit report, '*Bridging the Gap*', found that 161,000 or 9% of young people were outside of education, training or employment. It also found that:

  "the UK has lower rates of participation in education and a sharper decline between 16 and 18 than many other European countries."

- The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report 'Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion' published in 2000, confirmed the findings of 'Bridging the Gap', concluding that 150,000 16-18 year olds are not involved in education, training or work. This figure represents 9% of the age group.

- The National Adult Learning Survey 2001, found that 76% of adults aged 16-19 were engaged in any form of learning, compared to 82% in 1997. For the 20-29 age group the statistics were 86% in 2001, compared to 85% in 1997.

- The OFSTED annual report for 2000/1 reports that at least 10,000 teenagers aged 15-16 who should be attending school, are completely unaccounted for.

4. The Young Adult Learners Partnership

The Young Adult Learners Partnership (YALP) is a joint initiative of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the National Youth Agency (NYA). It is funded principally by the Local Government Association.

YALP researches and develops effective approaches to learning and personal development among young adults (aged 16-25) on the margins of education, training and employment, with the purpose of fostering their capability and their integration as young workers, parents and citizens.

Who is it for?

YALP serves policy makers, service managers and practitioners in the field of youth work and lifelong learning; and other agencies, such as the emerging Connexions services, working with young people which use informal learning, often outside institutional structures, to support the goals of more formal provision. It also seeks to represent and advance the needs, interests and aspirations of young adult learners, in particular those for whom conventional approaches do not work.

What do we do?

We are seeking a closer fit between the policies and programmes of providers of learning and skills and the needs, interests and aspirations of young adults; for example, by developing ways of teaching, learning and assessment which enhance self-esteem, emotional literacy and the development of basic and key skills.

How do we work?

By combining **action-research** which seeks to explore and understand the social circumstances and experiences which shape young adults' attitudes towards learning; and **development activities**, trying out new ideas and encouraging critical

thinking and practice across institutional boundaries through consultancy, publications and learning events, such as conferences and seminars. We are thereby able to contribute to debate and development at policy-making level with national and local government and to the formation of strategies that make a real difference for individual young adult learners.

What have we done so far?

Since it was established in 1997 YALP has:

- published *Finding the Missing* which established the reasons for and consequences of young people's disengagement from learning
- produced *Only Connect:* a guide to good practice in educational work with disaffected young adult learners
- devised and developed the *Getting Connected* curriculum (see below for further information)
- responded to consultations, and given advice to Government on policies and programmes, such as New Start, New Deal, Learning Gateway, Connexions and Transforming Youth Work
- developed *Getting Involved and Influential* (GI2), a resource to enable young adults to develop the skills required for active citizenship and influencing local government
- undertaken consultancy for Learning Partnerships, which has included: research into improving take-up and achievement of young adults in basic skills provision; and the transition and progression of young adults into FE and HE
- conducted research into young people's achievements in informal learning and arrangements for recording them, in the context of the Government's plans for 14-19 education
- researched ways in which informal learning can help young adults with mental health difficulties
- conducted research for Learning and Skills Councils on ways of engaging the voice of young adult learners in decisions about the provision of learning and skills.

Getting Connected

Getting Connected is a curriculum framework (with the option of accreditation) intended to enhance the self-esteem and emotional literacy of those young people outside the formal education and training system. Following a grant from the Community Fund we are pressing ahead with our plans for a phased national expansion of *Getting Connected*, which will involve holding training programmes throughout England for practitioners who want to use this curriculum to motivate young adults to learn and achieve.

For further information about *Getting Connected*, please visit our website: www.gettingconnected.org.uk or contact James Luger on 0116 2853744.

What have we learned so far?

The issues to consider in work with young adults include:

- the causes of disengagement remain many, complex and inter-related, and unique to each individual
- unsettled family circumstances play a big part in disrupting education and hindering achievement
- peer group pressure and culture remain powerful factors in determining young adults' decisions about returning to learning
- age makes a difference; while 16-18 year olds are more inclined to move in and out of programmes sampling different options, those aged 19 and over tend to be more vocationally-decided
- providers should take a holistic approach in responding to the needs, interests and aspirations of each young person
- effective partnerships between agencies are vital if such an approach is to work
- outreach is an effective means of contacting the missing
- incentives remain important in motivating young adult learners; these include money, stimulating programmes and qualifications
- a safe environment with supportive staff and sensitive assessment is a good place to start
- programmes should be designed so that learning is available in bite-size packages and success can be achieved at frequent intervals through different forms of assessment and accreditation
- the curriculum should combine key and vocational skills with programmes of personal development, thereby raising self-esteem
- contact needs to be sufficiently frequent and sustained to allow for breakthrough in building confidence and achievement

- clear pathways of progression and continuous support are vital in building on achievement
- intensification of practice is necessary if a sustained impact is to be made: outreach, assessment, guidance, coaching, teaching and learning, advocacy and support should be available at all points in the young adult's development.

Future Work

Future work to be undertaken by the Young Adult Learners Partnership will include:

- the expansion of the *Getting Connected* programme, including the implementation of mentor training throughout England and Wales;
- finalisation and publication of the GI2 resource and curriculum framework;
- consultancy for LSCs, Connexions Partnerships, Learning Partnerships and other organisations;
- publication of the Clued In newsletter three times per year;
- annual conferences;
- a series of briefing papers, including: the voice of the learner; basic skills; and the Learning Gateway;
- continued work in engaging and consulting young adult learners;
- support for Neighbourhood Support Fund projects, particularly in the area of recording informal learning;
- action research, including: the learning needs of young adults with mental health difficulties (funded by the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund); and young adults' basic skills needs;

For further information about YALP, please contact Nicola Aylward, Projects Co-ordinator (YALP) on 0116 2853738 or e-mail

nicola.aylward@niace.org.uk**, or visit our website:**

www.niace.org.uk/research/YALP/default.htm

or

www.nya.org.uk/yalp.htm

References and Further Reading

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Winners and losers in an expanding system: the NIACE survey on adult participation in learning 2001. Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett. NIACE, 2001. ISBN 1862011257. £6.00 www.niace.org.uk/Publications/W/Winners.htm

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient resources.
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